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THE ALTERNATIVE PRESS

JOURNALISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Symbols live on long after substance dies. "Underground press," whatever you were, R.I.P.

The underground press was variously born in 1964 and 1965 (when a group of papers including the Los Angeles Free Press and the Berkeley Barb began publishing); or in 1955 (when *The Village Voice* appeared); or at the turn of the century (when Socialist and Populist papers flourished). In any case, by the end of the 1960s every major American city, and many minor ones, had an underground paper that was publishing on a continuing, though often, sporadic, basis. These papers hardly formed a continuous thread, but it was not unfair to consider them patches on the same quilt. They related with one another partly on the basis of politics, partly on the basis of culture and partly, perhaps crucially, because they shared a very particular time and place. Tautologically, they were all in the underground family because they all wanted there to be something called the "underground" (otherwise, "The Movement").

But "underground," after all, means something very specific; it means "outlawed," and from the start underground press people were alternately pleased with the resonance of the word and aware of the limitations it placed on them. By the early 1970s the underground press was at its peak, but a growing number of people working on these papers saw the word "underground" as more a limitation than a glorious banner. And their change of heart was not purely semantic. Once starting a paper and surviving for six months had become a less rare trip, a more tolerant eye was turned toward a few of the artifacts of the straight press. Investigative reporting, for example; the possibility of combining radical analysis with long hours of poring over corporation commission records.

It is to the discredit of the liberal "straight" press that this flux beneath them went almost totally undetected. Feeling in accord with the substance of most basic underground press positions, but also feeling stylistically threatened, liberal writers adopted two misleading axioms:

(1) The new papers are to be judged purely as journalism; ergo, as journalism manqué.

(2) There is a finite area which may be neatly labeled "underground" and which is inhabited by some strange, or at least very different ("alienated," you know), creatures.

These axioms are crippling. The first obscures the fact that early underground papers and their successors have functioned as cultural (and social and political) phenomena as much as they have been exercises in journalism. They have served as laboratories for the study of social organization. When the women of New

York's Rat throw out the men on the paper, or when the San Francisco *Good Times* (and numerous other papers) tries to integrate an absolutely egalitarian communal life style into the operation of a 28-page biweekly paper, what we have is not just good or bad journalism.

The second axiom draws a dividing line where none has existed for some time. Even more damagingly, it prevents one from seeing the multitude of linkages that are making their appearance and gathering strength. A journalistic cross-fertilization and hybridization is going on in the country. Some members of the new "family" haven't been introduced to one another yet, and if they were to be, would undoubtedly quarrel bitterly. Nevertheless, they're related.

For an operational definition of the old "underground" and the new "alternative," I'll turn to a widely published (*Creem*, *Fusion*, *Sun Dance*, *The Realist*, numerous underground papers) young journalist named Tom Miller. In August of 1971, a federal grand jury in Tucson sought Miller's appearance and testimony about his "radical" contacts (cf. Frank J. Donner and Eugene Cerruti, "The Grand Jury Network," *The Nation*, January 3, 1972), and in return Miller sought journalistic immunity. Miller informed the judge:

"Underground press" [refers] to newspapers developed over the last five years which are concerned with non-conformist trends culturally and politically, and which operate on a low, low financial plane, if indeed any at all. Culturally this means new art forms—in music, dress, life style, cinema, graphics, writing, painting, photography, etc. Politically, this means all forms of anti-government activity and dissent. . . . These topics all are merged and constantly are tangentially related. . . . The "alternative media" includes all this and more. It . . . includes a number of publications which, although they are not as vociferous and forthright in their views, do serve, propagate and analyze the developing life styles in the country.

The suggestive phrase, I think, is "includes all this and more." What follows is a discussion of some of what's included.

Bruce Brugmann, who runs the San Francisco *Bay Guardian*, looks like everyone's favorite high school teacher. He is in his late 30s, large, fair and tweedy; slightly preoccupied, but earnest and friendly when he fixes his attention upon you. He is so clearly separated from the youth culture that he wears a jacket and tie to work and says things like, "I'm first and foremost interested in putting out a paper, not in putting together a commune."

But the point about Brugmann is not that he and the *Bay Guardian* represent any kind of antithesis to underground papers but that he represents the cultivation of old journalistic standards in a new garden. He eschews Movement talk for newspaper talk ("I've never had a story bounced in my life—and the *Guardian's* never had a story bounced"), and his style is considered misguidedly reformist by some Bay Area radicals. However, no one doubts his willingness to go to the mat, and Move-

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